

ADDRESSING MAINE'S SCHOOL FACILITIES NEEDS

RECENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS THAT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE GROWTH PLANNING

BACKGROUND

During the last several years, Maine has embarked on an unprecedented course of action to address the condition and program capacity of our public school facilities. The new approach has included a comprehensive statewide needs assessment conducted in 1996, new policy initiatives to respond to those needs, and significant new funding resources which aggressively support solutions. Support and funding for the policy initiatives has been very strong from the Maine Legislature, Governor King, and schools and communities all over Maine. The process is comprehensive, fair, and absolutely needs based.

The new programs are making a difference. Over one hundred school units, involving nearly one hundred fifty buildings and impacting more than 50,000 students, have received funding from the Revolving Renovation Fund. More applications continue to be processed. The Major Capital Improvement Program, with significant new increases in debt limit in recent years, is part-way through its second two-year approval cycle. Twenty-four projects were committed to in the first cycle, and eleven more from the second cycle have recently been given the green light to begin the process. That would bring the total to thirty-five major capital construction projects under construction or in the planning stages since the spring of 2000.

The legislative vehicle for most of the recent changes in school facilities policy was LD2252, enacted in 1998 to implement the recommendations of the Governor's School Facilities Commission. An important element of that legislation was an increased emphasis on the long-term planning required for a new or upgraded school facility. Planning for educational programs, as well as site and community use, is critical for a building that must function for another fifty years, or more in some cases. To that end, LD2252 requires State Planning Office involvement and expertise early in the process, as well as their input to the State Board Site Approval. Subsequent legislation (LD2600) in the 120th Legislature (Spring, 2000) and LD1783 the following Session has further strengthened the school site selection and approval process.

Highlights of legislation, policy, and rules enacted or adopted since 1998 supportive of **EFFECTIVE GROWTH PLANNING** include:

- A. NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR IN-DEPTH LONG-TERM FACILITIES PLANS** based on educational program needs, comprehensive enrollment projections, and existing facilities assessments.

B. A NEW EMPHASIS ON & RESOURCES FOR RENOVATION and upgrading of existing facilities where appropriate - an option not previously available.

C. STATE PLANNING OFFICE ASSISTANCE AND ANALYSIS becomes an integral part of the process from the very beginning for those projects that may have implications for site location.

- A new informational brochure has been produced and distributed to all Maine schools. The brochure, which overviews key elements to consider in the project concept and site selection process, was a collaborative effort by the SPO, DOE, and State Board of Education.
- The new project application requires SPO notification and triggers regional planner resources.
- The SPO assistance and required analysis becomes part of the State Board of Education Site Approval process and may include a waiver of the Boards site size requirements.

D. REVISIONS TO THE MAXIMUM ALLOWABLE TUITION RATE that a receiving School Administrative Unit may charge a sending SAU. A mutually agreed upon amount may now be added to cover newly incurred debt service for related facility improvements by the receiving unit. The change allows more flexibility for SAU's to reach mutually beneficial solutions for their school facilities needs.

E. NEW REQUIREMENTS TO FURTHER DEFINE AND STRENGTHEN SITE RULES

Legislation (LD2600) enacted in the Second Session of the 119th Legislature required the State Board of Education to adopt rules relating to siting of new school construction projects, not including additions to existing schools, which receive state funding. The site selection and approval process followed by the Department of Education, State Planning Office, and State Board of Education became much more comprehensive following the enactment of LD2252 in 1998. New major and substantive rules (Chapter 60), adopted in the spring of 2001 (LD1783), further define the approval process and critical elements that will be considered by the State Board before granting a site approval. The new rules also include a heightened level of scrutiny for projects that involve a new school on a new site that may have implications for effective growth planning in the SAU member municipality(s).

Additionally, at the request of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, the State Board of Education and State Planning Office are developing a method and format for reporting school siting progress/issues to the Legislature on a regular basis.